

# Dr. Scott Taylor

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Good afternoon members of the board. It really is an honor for me to speak before you. I hold this board and New Jersey's educators responsible for making our state's schools among the very, very best in the nation. I shared some data with the New Jersey community in a recent op-ed article I wrote. The latest U.S. News and World Report ranking of states places New Jersey number two in the country and, notably, number six with regards to the four-year college and university graduation rate. It's apparent that we're all doing a particularly good job setting our high school graduates up for success when they move on to higher education. Education Week, the profession's widely read publication, also lists New Jersey number two even though it uses a different set of criteria to make the determination. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows New Jersey at number four and number five in math and reading, respectively, in the country.

I bring all of this up not to pat ourselves on the back but because I believe the data is a positive reinforcer; the systems you have put in place are working. We've been graduating our kids under

the guise of the alternative assessment and portfolio system for several years all the while maintaining the highest standards of excellence in the United States. We've been able to maintain high standards and foster the highest quality educational experience in the nation without having to implement the PARCC passing requirement. Why change now? The graduation requirement resolution you're considering will sustain this excellence. Let's not tinker with something that doesn't need to be fixed.

The board should see this resolution as an opportunity to expand on its pioneering work to grow socially and emotionally healthy kids. Thanks to your leadership, New Jersey is among the first in the country to adopt five social-emotional skills standards. You're no doubt responding to the alarming statistics about school violence. Forty-one percent of school violence assailants were considered to be mainstream students, although only 12% had few very close friends. Seventy-one percent of the attackers were victims of bullying and 81% held a grievance against another person at the time of the attack (I'm citing a paper written by Kean University professor Allison Paolini). We need to strengthen kids' relationships with each other and with the adults in their schools. Interpersonal skills, empathy, and self-confidence, all aspects of social-emotional wellness, are not just "add-ons;" they're a necessity now.

Approving the graduation requirement resolution will give our state's educators more room to meet the social-emotional learning mandate the board helped put in place. The resolution provides the opportunity to double-down on its commitment to growing children who are confident, empathic, and have strong interpersonal skills. It can assure that graduates do more

than master academics by giving them the freedom to focus on their psychological well-being. What good is math and English language arts mastery if it can't be applied to better society by socially and emotionally healthy young adults?

I'll leave you with an enticing proposal. How about the board take its progressive-thinking approaches to the next level and be among the first in the country to do away with exit assessment requirements completely? I recognize this is a bold idea, but it may be one worth strongly considering. Consider the two key pieces of data I shared with you- Our listing as number two in the country for education excellence is in part due to New Jersey's exceptionally high graduation rates. Our kids are successfully satisfying the course mandates the state board has supported. Many of these kids are moving on to colleges and universities and finishing their coursework at the higher education level thanks to the teachers and their school leaders who are preparing them for the rigors of postsecondary education. Let's keep this good work going and build on it by going the next step and elevating their ability to be mentally healthy, socially stable, and emotionally strong citizens.

Thank you for giving me this time to share my thoughts with you. My superintendent colleagues and I are your partners in all of this work; don't hesitate to lean on us for support.